THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT EARLY CHRISTIANITY: 8 SURPRISING FACTS

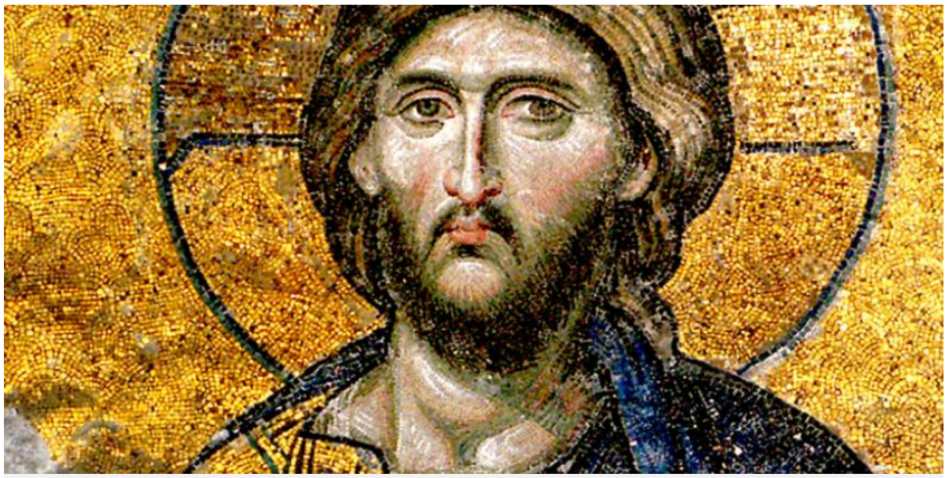

Image: The Deësis mosaic at the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople taken by Edal Anton Lefterov | Wikimedia

Ancient History | Religion

Christianity is the most widely practised religion in the world with recent figures suggesting it has 2.3 billion followers, around 31% of the global population.

The faith is focused on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God.

We take a look back at the early years of Christianity, when the religion was in its infancy and discover eight surprising facts that you might not know about.

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by Richard Bevan

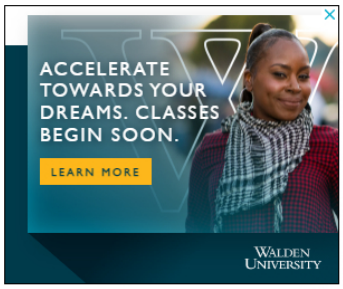
The Jesus movement

Whilst Christianity can be classified as an organised religion in today's world, it was far from organised in the beginning. In the years following the death of Jesus, his followers numbered no more than a hundred.

It didn't begin as a religion either but rather as a movement, with the Romans classifying it as a sect. Its early followers were Jews based in Jerusalem who didn't necessarily view themselves as Christians but rather as followers of a Jewish sect.

'Christian' is coined

A group of followers settled in the ancient Greek city of Antioch some 10-15 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. It was here that the term 'Christian' was first coined. It wasn't a name the followers of Jesus had given themselves but rather



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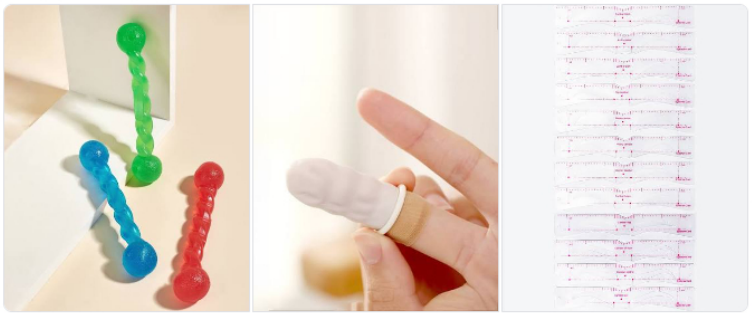
it was a term applied to them by the people of Antioch. Historians debate whether or not it was originally used as a derogatory term.

Paul spread the word

Of Jesus' 12 disciples, Paul did the most to spread the word of Christ, making him one of the most influential people in early Christianity. Historians have even argued that the teachings of Jesus Christ might not have been so widespread had Paul not conducted his missionary work.

Initially, Paul was a persecutor of early Christians before converting and becoming a follower of Jesus. He travelled around the Roman Empire, spreading Jesus' ideas via word and written text and establishing multiple churches across the Mediterranean and Africa.



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The promise of an afterlife

Christianity's earliest converts were men and women from all social classes. However, the Christian ideology of humility, compassion and the treatment of all people as equal found a receptive audience amongst the weak, poor and oppressed.

The promise of an afterlife also played a significant role in converting people to Christianity in its infancy. All who believed were promised a life after death, an immortal existence in heaven, which proved to be an appealing offer to many.

The Saviour will return

Early Christians expected Jesus to return soon and would gather in small groups, often in houses, to sing, pray and commemorate their saviour.

Other followers shunned their previous earthly existence and dedicated themselves to a life of prayer and worship, often alone in faraway places like caves, waiting patiently for the imminent return of Jesus. These devout Christians took vows of celibacy and poverty becoming the first monks and nuns.

The fate of the Apostles

They sat and dined with Jesus in Jerusalem before his crucifixion and after the Lord's death, they set forth around the world to spread his message about the Kingdom of God. However, most of the 12 disciples suffered greatly for their faith and met grizzly ends.

Paul was beheaded in Rome whilst James son of Zebedee suffered the same fate in Jerusalem. Peter was crucified in Rome upside down, as he did not feel worthy enough to die in the same way Jesus did.

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Philip, Andrew and Simon the Zealot also died on the cross. Thomas was speared to death in India, Bartholomew was skinned alive before being beheaded and it is believed James son of Alphaeus was stoned before being clubbed to death.

Most accounts suggest Mathew was also martyred although the method by which he met his end varies and includes burning, stabbing, beheading or stoning. Jude might also have died on the cross or by the sharp end of an axe but again accounts vary. Judas famously hung himself after betraying Jesus.

John is generally regarded as the only one to die of natural causes due to old age.

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Women led the way

According to scripture, Jesus had no gender bias, treating and looking upon men and women as equals. Within his inner circle were many women including Mary Magdalene. Women were the last disciples at the cross and the first to discover the empty tomb.

The integral role women played in the growth of early Christianity is often forgotten and overlooked. In the decades that followed the death of Jesus, women served as leaders of the house churches that were cropping up across the Roman Empire. Women also joined the apostles on their missionary journeys, not as their subordinates or marriage partners but as their colleagues.

Christians in the catacombs

Unlike their pagan counterparts, early Christian Romans did not believe in burning their dead. They wished to bury them, however, it was illegal in ancient Rome to do so within the city limits. This led to the creation of miles of underground burial grounds outside the city walls, known as catacombs, from around the second century AD.

In the past, historians believed they were secret meeting places for Christians to gather to escape persecutions. However, it is now understood they were burial tunnels where the dead were wrapped in sheets and placed in alcoves along the subterranean tunnels. Christians weren't the only ones buried in the catacombs, but Jews and Roman pagans were also laid to rest there.

The catacombs provide us with an important insight into art history, as they contain a great number of frescos and sculptures known to be the earliest examples of Christian art.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine recognised Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century AD, persecutions against the Christians began to cease. As churches started cropping up, the dead began to be buried in their accompanying cemeteries and the use of the tunnels to lay the dead to rest in the catacombs came to an end in the fifth century AD.

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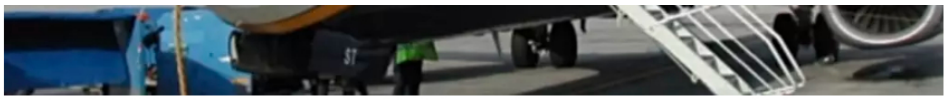

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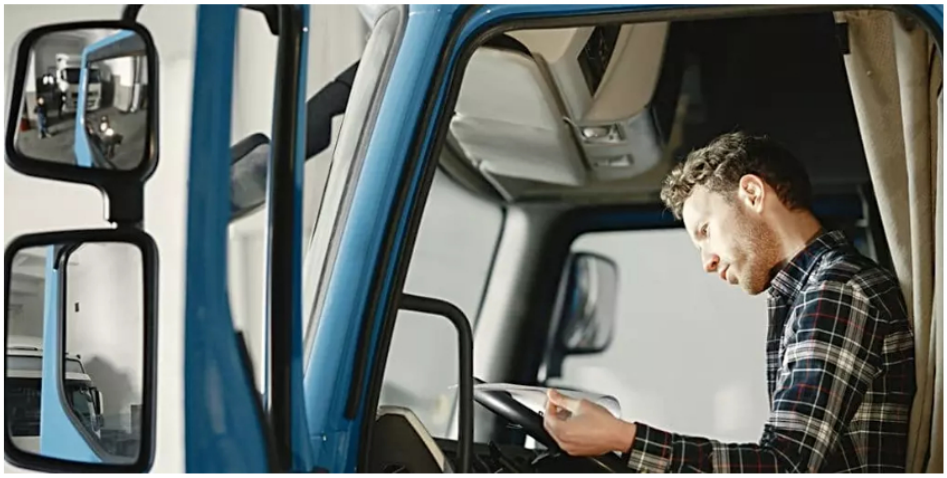

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